A DETECTIVE WHO DETECTED

By Philip G. Hubert, Jr.

II.

For a few moments I sat dazed at my discovery. That, however, was no state of mind for a detective, especially for a detective who had detected something. What was I to do? Denounce this young girl as a possible thief to the library authorities? Such a course would put an end to her chances for copying any more English stories for American newspapers; but it would mean disgrace, and in all probability it would not result in recovering the $100 that the Gazette had lost. Moreover, the more I thought of the girl and her pleasant ways, the less I liked the idea of accusing her of wrongdoing. I pondered the problem for a good hour. Danders' note was in my pocket. It was some encouragement to find that the handwriting was not a bit like the fine feminine scrawl of Miss Ellen Robertson. It was perfectly possible that this copy of the Londoner might have been taken out by another person, Danders, for instance, as well as by Miss Robertson. With this theory in view I went manfully to work at my cards again, and so thoroughly convinced myself that such must be the case that when my friend, the librarian, passed my desk at closing time, and asked me whether I had found my man, I was weak enough to say, No. According to the strict terms of the inquiry, I had not found my man; it was a woman. I came across several more cards bearing Miss Robertson's signature and a request for the Londoner of 1848; evidently she had used the volume almost every day for a week. That evening I kept away from the Gazette office in order to avoid the questions I should have met there, for I had reported that I was examining the cards in the Manhattan library. Thus does conscience make cowards even of successful detectives.

The next day I put in eight hours of work at my bundles of cards, going back half a year. Apparently no one else had touched that number of the Londoner or any other number of that magazine. I reviewed the evidence as detectives are wont to do in books. Here was a young woman engaged from morning till night in copying from the Londoner of June, 1848. "Daisy's Quest" had been stolen from this book, and according to Terrill, an expert, it was unlikely that there was another copy outside of that library to be found in the country. No other person had taken the book out.

Nevertheless, before any accusation could be made, it would certainly be necessary to connect Miss Robertson with Danders. That might not be easy. Puzzled and sick at heart, I was leaving the library at four o'clock, when at the door I found Miss Robertson gazing out into the rain with dismay. I had purposely avoided her during the day, contenting myself with making sure that she was at work as usual. It was impossible to avoid her now, for I had an umbrella and she had none. Perhaps, after all, a detective ought not to neglect this opportunity to know more of Miss Robertson. So I offered to take her to the car. Her manner was a trifle stiff; perhaps she had noted and resented my studied avoidance.

"Let me see—you will have to take a Sixth avenue car," said this particular detective, in his stupid way.

"Why, yes; but how did you know that?" said Miss Robertson, her curiosity getting the best of her displeasure, if there had been any displeasure. Perhaps it was only my conceit that gave birth to this latter fancy.

I have always been considered a fairly ready liar, but for a few seconds I stumbled. I could not tell her that I had her address carefully copied into my note book. I suppose it was newspaper instinct that prompted me to say:

"I happened to see you take a Sixth avenue car last night as I was going home."

"That's very strange," said the girl, looking up at me with a twinkle that even the shadow of the umbrella could not eclipse, "for I walked all the way home last night."

I was enough of a liar to see my way clear now.

"Really! Then it must have been some one very much like you, and some one who came from the library. Then perhaps you do not take the Sixth avenue car after all?"

"Yes, I do. I live in Thirtieth street. But before I take my car I have to stop on Sixth avenue at a book-store where I ordered some writing-paper for my father last night. The rain has stopped, so that I needn't trouble you to go out of your way any farther."

"It is not out of my way. Besides, it might rain again."

So we went on towards Sixth avenue and then turned uptown. In less time than I can write it, and by what magic I hardly know, I had wholly forgotten that Miss Robertson was probably a criminal of a mild type and I the sleuth-hound on her track, the avenger. She had very pretty ways—for a criminal. And she talked more to my liking than any other girl I had met in years, or before that.

"There's the sort of rain costume you ought to have," I said, pointing to a draped wax figure in the brilliantly lighted show-window of a great shop—a woman in a long mackintosh, holding an open umbrella in the face of a supposititious rainstorm. It was the regular rainy-day exhibition of that particular shop.

Miss Robertson paused and looked at the display with interest. There were also costly gowns and fine furs in the same window showcase, which was as big as some drawing-rooms.

"Yes, that is very nice," she said, with something of a sigh. Evidently the sight of so much silk and satin made her envious.

"Why," I asked, "does every woman sigh deeply as she turns away from such a display or from a jeweler's window? Five women turned away from that window in the last three minutes, and every one of them gave a deep sigh as she did so."

"Did I sigh too?"

"You were the fifth."

"It was not covetousness that made me sigh," she said. "It was the sight of that umbrella held against what was supposed to be a driving storm. Have you ever noticed how easy it is to run into a lamppost or into another person when you carry an umbrella in that way? Of course you have. My poor father made that observation several years ago, and was unfortunate enough to devise a remedy."

"Unfortunate?"

"Yes. Do you remember my mentioning, the day we first met, that my father's eyesight had been almost destroyed by an accident? One night during a storm, when people staggered blindly along, their umbrellas held straight in front of them, a woman put the point of her umbrella into my father's eye. At the time he thought but little of the matter, but some nerve was injured, and he has been almost blind ever since. That is nearly three years ago. While laid up, he invented a way to prevent such accidents. He proposed to sew an eyeglass into the umbrella, so that a person could look ahead and avoid any obstruction."

"Not a bad idea, I should think. I suppose he patented it and lost a pile of money; inventors always do."

"Yes, he lost more money than we could afford, making experiments, and I did my best to spoil a dozen fine umbrellas—we had quite a lot of them—by cutting holes in them and sewing in bits of glass that wouldn't stay in place after all."

"But the patent? Why couldn't he sell that for lots of money?"

"The patent? Oh, he never got a patent. It seems that some one took a patent on the same idea more than 40 years ago. It cost papa about $400 to find that out. Patent lawyers are expensive. Poor papa! Between the Spanish Inquisition and his patent umbrella—" And a sigh finished the sentence.

"Did he show his idea to any umbrella makers?"

"Oh, yes. But when he found that he couldn't get a patent he lost heart and put the dozen umbrellas away in a corner, each umbrella with a big hole but with no glass as yet. That's why I have no umbrella to-day."

"Blessed invention!" I ventured, and I really meant it.

Miss Robertson flushed slightly.

"You wouldn't say so if you knew what it has cost us."

"I know an umbrella maker," I went on. "He's an intimate friend of mine. Do you think your father would object to my taking one of his sample umbrellas to my friend? Patent or no patent, it might be worth something. You might at least get your $400 back again."

"You are very kind. I will speak to him about it. Here is my street; good-night, and thank you."

I was loath to let her go.

"Suppose I ask your father at once; would that do any harm?"

Miss Robertson's pretty brow contracted for a few seconds. "I think not," she said, finally, and we went on. "My father is a little peculiar. Illness has made him so; if he is a trifle brusque, you must put it down to the whim of an invalid."

We stopped at an old-fashioned, comfortable house of the plainer sort, and

"My book on the Spanish Inquisition."

Miss Robertson opened the door with a latch-key. After climbing two flights of stairs I was ushered into a plainly furnished but exquisitely neat and clean room. There was a lamp on the table, under the light of which an old woman sat sewing. Before a grate fire sat a man who must have been an exceedingly handsome fellow in his youth. Even at 65 his white hair and bushy beard and eyebrows gave no sign of illness, for his complexion was as rosy as that of a child, and as his keen ears detected the step of a stranger there was almost the elasticity of youth in the way he stood up and, holding to the arm of his chair, waited for explanations.

Miss Robertson nodded to the old woman and kissed her father.

"Papa dear, here is a gentleman who wants to talk to you about your work. By the way, it has just occurred to me that I do not know your name. This is terribly improper, is it not?" She smiled as she took her father's hand in hers and gently patted it. The old man waited silently.

"You see, papa dear, this gentleman has been very kind in helping me at the library; and to-night, as I had no umbrella and as it was raining, he insisted upon bringing me home."

"You are welcome, sir. Ellen, has the gentleman a chair?" And until he heard me sit down the old man remained standing. "You wish to see me about my book on the Spanish Inquisition. Are you a publisher?"

"No, no, papa dear. It's about the umbrella that Mr.—" and again she paused.

"Seymour," I said—"James Seymour."

"—that Mr. Seymour wishes to see you. On the way home we happened to see something that suggested our patent to me, and Mr. Seymour knows an umbrella manufacturer who might be interested in the matter, even if nothing more came of it."

While her father pondered she said to me: "We speak of it as our patent, although, as I told you, we have no patent."

"I could take my friend one of your umbrellas this evening," I said. What awful lies we detectives have to tell!

Miss Robertson looked at her father. "You are very kind," said the father. "The trouble is, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Seymour," the girl prompted.

"Ah, yes, thank you, dear—Mr. Seymour—you are very kind, but we have not one umbrella fit to show. My daughter has not succeeded in sewing the eye-glass piece in so that it holds its place when the umbrella is opened and closed."

"I can easily finish the one I began last," said Miss Robertson, "if Mr. Seymour could wait for a few moments."

"Most certainly I can," said I, perfectly happy, and willing to wait all night if necessary, "and—"

Here I stopped to listen to a queer noise or succession of noises coming through the half-closed door of the next room. It was the sort of sound that is made by a pump when sucking air instead of water, or by a person in great distress from asthma.

"That's Mrs. Wiggins," said Miss Robertson, jumping up. "Please excuse me for a moment." She left the room, closing the door after her. I had hardly begun to talk with Mr. Robertson before she came back.

"Mrs. Wiggins says that supper will be spoiled unless it is eaten at once—this minute. And, as it will take me a good many minutes to make that umbrella presentable to a real umbrella manufacturer, may I ask Mr. Seymour to take supper with us?"

Before the father could add his request I had assented, without attempt to hide my pleasure.

"It is ready now, and on the table," she went on, ushering me into the next room, which proved to be a tiny room even for three persons—so small, in fact, that every time Mrs. Wiggins appeared from the kitchen Miss Ellen had to rise and move her chair to let her in.

"This room often reminds me," said Miss Robertson, "of the lady who closed her first visit to a New York flat with the remark: 'Well, now that I have seen all the closets, where are the rooms?' She must have come from Virginia, our old home; we have big houses there. But if it is a closet or no better, it's our own. With Mrs. Wiggins"—here the same curious sound of a pump in distress made itself heard—"that's Mrs. Wiggins now;" and Miss Ellen jumped up to allow that singular old woman to come in with a dish of roasted rabbit.

When the door closed after her, "Mrs. Wiggins has her peculiarities, as you may observe," said Miss Robertson, laughing. "That peculiar snort of hers is something I can't understand, except as a signal to open the door. You see, I have to get up every time the door is opened; and, as Mrs. Wiggins usually has her hands full of plates or carries a tray, she cannot knock."

"And to kick she is ashamed; or perhaps she feels that it would be undignified," added Mr. Robertson, with a smile.

"So she snorts," said Miss Ellen.

"And she can also cook," said I, for the rabbit was excellent and cooked to perfection. Roast rabbit was something I had not tasted since I came from the country.

"I really don't know what we should do without her, papa, dear. You see," turning to me, "she stays in the room with my father a great deal of the time while I am away, so that she can get him whatever he requires."

And so we chatted throughout the meal, with but one shadow upon the feast. I felt that I was a traitor. Here I was eating and enjoying the bread of these good people and meanwhile plotting their ruin. Another week's acquaintance with the Robertson family, and I should be ready to throw the Gazette overboard and help the criminals to escape. After the meal was over and Mrs. Wiggins had snorted at the kitchen door for the last time and gone home, we sat down by the fire, and while Mr. Robertson gave me a somewhat rambling account of his researches upon the Spanish Inquisition—at least it seemed rambling to me, perhaps because of a disturbing vision upon the other side of the fireplace—Miss Ellen worked deftly at one of the famous umbrellas, and I talked as cleverly as I knew how, trying to divide my remarks between the Spanish Inquisition and the patent umbrella. Very much too soon those deft and dainty fingers had finished their task.

"There," exclaimed Miss Robertson, with an accent of triumph, interrupting her father's graphic description of the persuasive effects of thumbscrews as manipulated by the Spanish Inquisitors, "I do believe practice makes perfect. If that eye-glass falls out, I shall be surprised. Nevertheless, Mr. Seymour, you can tell your friend that this is the work of a beginner. By the way, it's my old school umbrella."

I tested the work and shook the umbrella up and down. It had been so long since I had had a taste of anything like home life, and this little glimpse of a home had been so grateful to me, that I was sorry to find that the glass held in place. It might be a long time before I was invited to sit before that fire again. Half-past eight rang out from the little clock on the mantelshelf. I had no further excuse for staying.

"Whether or not I succeed in convincing my friend of the value of this great invention," I said, getting up, "I must thank you both for a pleasant evening." And I told them something of my boarding house life, the only one open to a young man who comes from the country to make his way in the great city. In return they told me something of their old home in Virginia.

"Come again as soon as you can and let us know the result," said the old man, rising to bid me good-by. Miss Robertson said nothing, but her dark eyes beamed kindly.

"I suppose that you are in business here," continued the father, "although you are neither a publisher nor an umbrella-maker."

He paused, and during the pause an idea came to me. Suppose I told them that I was upon the staff of the Gazette. If they had any guilty knowledge of "Daisy's Quest," surely something of the guilt would show. It was an idea worth acting upon, but even as I determined to carry it out I also resolved that rather than bring trouble into that home I would throw the whole business up and report that the man who stole "Daisy's Quest" had gone to Australia.

"You are neither a publisher nor an umbrella-maker?" he repeated. I gathered myself for the blow.

"No," I said as calmly as I could, gazing at the fire, "I am simply a reporter for the New York Gazette." Then I watched to see how they took the blow. Neither father nor daughter seemed to be in the least impressed. Not a muscle of the old gentleman's face moved. The daughter raised her eyebrows and said: "Ah!" with a smile. That was all.

Probably the late M. Vidocq would have discerned black guilt and the writhing of a guilty conscience in this behavior, or at least the hardihood of the brazen criminal. But decidedly I was no Vidocq, for I saw nothing but innocence. I was very young.

[TO BE CONTINUED]